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Marcus Wolf

Division of Marketing and Communications

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UMaine Today



Nicholas Martinez: Returning to college to help others like him

July 8, 2021

A speech language pathologist changed Nicholas Martinez's life. Now he's going to do the same for others.

When Martinez was a child growing up in Pleasant Point, Maine, a speech language pathologist worked with him to manage his stuttering disorder. The experience inspired him to pursue a master's degree in communication sciences and disorders at the University of Maine.

He will graduate in August, prepared to provide life-changing services for others.

"I really liked the idea of helping people with their speech and language issues, particularly because I know what it's like," Martinez says. "For me to help somebody, I feel like at some level, you have to empathize with them. And for me, being able to empathize with people with speech and language disorders is a big thing."

In 2009, Martinez, who now lives in Bangor, earned a bachelor's degree in marine engineering from Maine Maritime Academy and went on to work as a merchant mariner for nine years. He spent months overseas, which was difficult on his young family — his wife, Erin, and daughter, Arabella.

He knew Erin, who is a nurse, and his twin sister, Tiffany, a psychiatric nurse practitioner, truly enjoyed their careers helping others. And Martinez remembered speech language pathologist Margaret Peacock, who helped him mitigate his stutter and improve his communication skills.

"Switching careers, I wanted to do something where I could have a career that could help people on a personal level," says Martinez, who enrolled in the UMaine communication sciences and disorders graduate program in 2019. "All of these ideas came to my head, and the one that resonated with me the most was speech language pathology because of that personal piece that I bring to the table."

During his two years of study, Martinez has helped children and adults with communication-related



disorders through clinicals in various settings. He worked at UMaine's Conley Speech, Language and Hearing Center in Dunn Hall, in the Brewer Community School supervised by speech language pathologist Deana Small, and through the UMaine speech therapy telepractice program supervised by UMaine speech language pathologists MaryBeth Richards, also an adjunct instructor, and Judy Walker, also an associate professor, helping children and adults with their speech and language. Most recently, he has been helping treat children and adult patients with swallowing, speech, language and voice disorders at the Redington-Fairview General Hospital in Skowhegan under the supervision of speech language pathologist and UMaine alumna Sarah Robertson.

Martinez says some of his best experiences are working with clients who are not only making progress, but "tell you how much their new skills have carried over into their general life."

"I had an aphasia client come and tell me that the strategies that we used and the language skills that we worked on gave him the confidence and the ability to go out to eat, go order food from the waiter, be able to follow directions and pay for things, when a short time — I'd say a year to two years before that — that would be completely out of the question," Martinez says. "Hearing people's personal successes gives me a really nice boost."

The diversity of opportunities for clinicals and dedication of faculty to ensure that students can obtain their necessary clinical hours convinced Martinez to pursue his degree at UMaine, he says. Several UMaine faculty members he met before deciding to apply have since helped him along his academic journey. He says watching Walker treat adult patients helped inform his own treatment approaches, and working with Richards for observation early on in his academic career and being able to ask her numerous questions gave him guidance at a time when "I knew pretty much knew nothing about the field."

"The way that UMaine does it, you really learn the process of everything, from interviewing to documentation, to a basic treatment plan, to plans of care; all of those things," Martinez says. "The university does, I think, a great job giving you those of foundational skills, so then I, as a clinician, will continue to get better to generalize those skills to all kinds of different folks."

While working at his clinicals, Martinez learned that there are no universal methods to help all patients, he says. Treatment must be tailored to each person's needs. Martinez says he also learned that each client grows in different ways, and every milestone is an accomplishment.

"Sometimes, it's a painstaking effort to just get a little bit of improvement from clients, but in some ways, to see even just a little bit of improvement in certain clients is still very rewarding," Martinez says. "You just have to meet clients where they are, and that progress is going to look a lot different for each client."

Returning to school while helping care for his children, Arabella, 4, and Garrison, 2, pushed Martinez to improve his ability to manage time, which he says was his biggest challenge. Learning the skills he needs to work in the communication sciences and disorders field required many late nights, he says.

Changing careers and going back to school, however, offered Martinez the opportunity to strengthen the bonds he has with his children. While working as a merchant marine, spending up to three months overseas at a time, Martinez's daughter would usually rely on his wife more than him, he says.

"I kind of noticed when I got home, as time went on, there was that level of trust that, oh, I'm really going to be here, and that she would actually rely on me for certain things or count on me for certain things that I hadn't seen before," he says.

Martinez plans to work in a private practice, primarily helping children with communication related-disabilities in schools in the greater Bangor area.

"I want to be able to provide kids and even adults with a sounding board or an empathetic figure to work on the things that they have to work on, whether it's stuttering or other speech-related issues or other language-related issues," he says.

Contact: Marcus Wolf, 207.581.3721; marcus.wolf@maine.edu



Division of Marketing and Communications
5703 Alumni Hall
Orono, ME 04469-5703

Tel: 207.581.3743
Fax: 207.581.3776

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